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# Planet

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WHAT does it mean to say that we live on a planet? The ecocritic Ursula Heise makes a distinction between a localized sense of place and a larger "sense of planet," where the latter attends to the broad interconnectedness and interdependence of all living beings across the Earth.[1] This sense of planetary cohabitation is usually thought of as a product of the twentieth-century environmental movement and the space program, which showed the Earth to be a fragile orb suspended in the cosmos like a spaceship. Yet iconic photographs such as "The Blue Marble" and "Earthrise" were not revelations of a new idea but the culmination of an extended history of the planetary imagination. In *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe*, Ayesha Ramachandran argues that the production of a "modern conception of cosmic totality" is fundamental to the project of Western modernity.[2] The question of our relation to the Earth as a planet is old, recurrent, and unresolved.

The planet is related to but distinct from cognate terms such as "globe," "world," or "Earth." Within Victorian studies, the "geopolitical aesthetic" (a term Lauren Goodlad adapts from Fredric Jameson) has been our dominant object of attention when we think about how cultural expression related to the totality of the Earth.[3] A geopolitical conception of the world centers on territory and empire. Cosmopolitan realist fiction "imagine[d] London as a figure for global human community," writes Tanya Agathocleous.[4] The ethos of such cosmopolitanism, argues Amanda Anderson, was a detached, impersonal view, unmoored from local allegiances.[5] To be worldly is to be everywhere and nowhere. The counterpart to this posture of cosmopolitan detachment is, of course, the material conflict and struggle that constituted the British Empire. Reflecting on Britain's effort to assert and maintain global dominance, Antoinette Burton writes that "the very character of imperial power was shaped by its challengers and the trouble they made for its stewards.

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Empire arguably has no history outside these struggles."[6] The worldly, the global: these ideas imply totality, completeness, and everywhereness. And when we think about the global context of Victorian culture, this geopolitical framework dominates. It has allowed scholars to argue that even the provincial novel or inward-looking aestheticism were enmeshed in global empire.

But postcolonial critics including Gayatri Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty have proposed that the concept of the "planet" creates some useful conceptual friction with this geopolitical conception of the "globe." The alien, inhuman quality of the planet as one celestial body among many disrupts the equation of the global with totality. Spivak observes that the term "globe" usually implies dominance, mapping, and surveillance, while on the other hand "the planet is in the species of alterity, belonging to another system; and yet we inhabit it, on loan."[7] This distinction is central to Dipesh Chakrabarty's intervention into debates about the Anthropocene. Chakrabarty asserts that a Marxist history of global capitalism lacks the conceptual tools necessary in the era of climate change, when ancient planetary systems can no longer be treated as the stable background of history and society. As distinct from "world, earth, and globe," the category "planet" is nonanthropocentric; "to encounter the planet in thought is to encounter something that is the condition of human existence and yet remains profoundly indifferent to that existence."[8] When human history diverts the history of the planet, the planet becomes a new category of humanist thought.

This distinction between the globe and the planet has major implications for scholars of nineteenth-century literature and culture. At the inception of the age of coal, planetary history was suddenly recognized as interlocked with human history. As the geologists William Conybeare and William Phillips wrote in 1824, "the manufacturing industry of this island [England] . . . rests principally on no other base than our fortunate position with regard to the rocks of this [carboniferous] series. Should our coal mines ever be exhausted, it would melt away at once."[9] This note of anxiety about a tenuous relation to the planet continued through the century. The figure of the planet was often decentering and anti-anthropocentric. The alien quality of the planet is what, in Thomas Hardy's *Two on a Tower* (1882), produces the sublime and ghastly "horror" of recognizing the miniscule size of the Earth in relation to interstellar space.[10] Stanley Jevons's *The Coal Question* (1865) grimly warned about the inevitable decline of the British Empire because it was powered by coal that had taken eons to form but would disappear within years.

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The planet becomes an animated being in M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), in which the Earth is so troubled by the human arrival at the North Pole that it vengefully eradicates human civilization. Realism, economic discourse, speculative fiction: in these and other realms the planetary asserted its distinction from the global.

A planetary approach to Victorian studies is already well underway. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller interprets the period's major fictional genres as symptoms of a culture built on an unsustainable extraction of the Earth's mineral resources, and therefore marked by a mood of exhaustion.[11] Nathan Hensley and Philip Steer argue that the persistence of atmospheric carbon emissions means that the Victorian era and the present together constitute one long historical period: "carbon modernity."[12] These interpretive frameworks treat the planet not as an object of the imagination but as the material condition of history. In order to speak about the planet, we will need to venture into the unfamiliar realms of Earth systems, geological time, the biosphere, and species history. This territory can no longer be out of bounds for humanist thought. But the promise of the "planet" as a new keyword for the field is not that it supplants the conceptual apparatus of globalization, empire, or cosmopolitanism, because it is precisely the relation between the planetary and the global that remains at stake. What we may find is that literature and culture extend deeper and higher than we had imagined, into the rocks and through the atmosphere.

## Notes

1. Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 55.
2. Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 4.
3. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 9.
4. Tanya Agathocleous, *Urban Realism and the Cosmopolitan Imagination in the Nineteenth Century: Visible City, Invisible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 11.
5. Amanda Anderson, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4.

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6. Antoinette M. Burton, *The Trouble with Empire: Challenges to Modern British Imperialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1.
7. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 72.
8. Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 70.
9. William Conybeare and William Phillips, *Outlines of the Geology of England and Wales* (London: William Phillips, 1822), 324.
10. Thomas Hardy, *Two on a Tower* (1882; London: Macmillan, 1976), 57.
11. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Extraction Ecologies and the Literature of the Long Exhaustion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 9.
12. Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer, “Ecological Formalism; or, Love among the Ruins,” in *Ecological Form: System and Aesthetics in the Age of Empire*, by Nathan K. Hensley and Philip Steer (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 3.

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